



**Testimony of Carolyn W. Colvin  
Before the United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Government Reform  
Delivered September 6, 2006**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Davis, Congressman Van Hollen and members of the Government Reform Committee, Mayor Porter and officials of the City of Takoma Park, elected officials and other partners in the area of youth violence prevention. We thank you Congressman Van Hollen, Congressman Wolf and the Maryland Delegation for supporting this effort.

I am Carolyn W. Colvin, Director of Montgomery County's Department of Health and Human Services, and co-Chair, along with Montgomery County Police Chief J. Thomas Manger, of Montgomery County's Gang Prevention Steering Committee. It is my privilege to speak before you today to share the significant strides that we have made in Montgomery and Prince George's counties to address gang issues.

Today I will share with you information on the importance of prevention and intervention services as complements to law enforcement action in discouraging, reducing and eliminating gang involvement and activity. I will offer information regarding the current focus and nature of services offered in the Department of Health and Human Services, and the partnerships which promote and provide community based services to at-risk youth and their families. I will discuss with you the importance of and the benefits we've realized as a result of centralized coordination of the initiative through the services of our Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator, the operations of the Montgomery County Gang Prevention Steering Committee; and our partnership with Prince George's County in delivering services via the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center. I will share with you information related to the manner in which we've served young people and their families through our efforts.

As you may know, our current operations stem from the work of the Joint County Gang Prevention Task Force, seated in February 2004 by Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, along with Prince George's County Executive Jack Johnson. The Joint County Task Force provided guidance and support to individual task forces convened within each County, and agreed upon a set of recommendations to further our shared interests in addressing gang violence and preventing youth involvement in gangs and criminal activity.

In our effort to operationalize gang prevention, we followed guidance offered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in its Comprehensive Gang Model. The model provided a multi-layered approach, consistent with our approach to address prevention, intervention and suppression of gang activity in our community.

We know that young people do well who have positive role models, who feel connected to their families and communities, and who have the opportunity to develop a sense of possibility for their futures. We know that young people need care and guidance, boundaries and monitoring – oversight. The lack of fundamental social constructs that families provide, offer fertile ground for groups and individuals promising friendship, familial relationships and protection. This is not to indicate that every child who is not adequately supervised will join a gang. But when you add language or cultural barriers, perceived lack of opportunity to live beyond the narrow confines of your community, lack of adequate recreational and educational offerings, and fear of physical violence or abuse to this equation, it may appear the only option to find friends, to have someone watching your back, to be safe is to join a gang. These conditions drive gang membership irrespective of race, irrespective of cultural background, irrespective of income.

Disaffected youth sometimes join gangs. Their kinship and connectedness to gangs drives their participation in violent and/or criminal acts in deference to gang leadership and in support of the continued success of the gang enterprise. We know that the gang problem is not limited to Latino gangs; and we have redoubled our efforts to reach out to underserved communities, as well as to look at young women, who have become increasingly involved in gang activity. Because of these conditions, it is necessary to include prevention and intervention services in our repertoire to fight gang activity. Incarceration without rehabilitation will not stop gang violence; we have to stop the flow of members to gangs through broad based community interventions.

The Department of Health and Human Services offers a series of services, programs and interventions to address gang prevention and youth violence. The Department has a long history of collaborative, community-based partnerships in the delivery of prevention and intervention services. The Youth Provider Council, whose membership well represents public-private partnership in service to youth, is committed to implementing best practices, engages in collaborative grant-seeking, and coordinates services/responses to specific community issues. The Youth Leadership Council's (YLC) membership includes former gang members and young people at risk for gang membership, and guides the development and implementation of community based services. The Youth Leadership Council (YLC) has participated in county and state wide forums and trainings in the schools, and in the community where they have educated youth, families, and practitioners about the consequences of joining gangs and how to effectively get out of gangs. The Youth Leadership Council (YLC) has also appeared before this committee to talk about how to effectively work with gang involved youth and how to develop programs that will keep youth out of gangs. The Youth

Leadership Council (YLC) has also been instrumental in helping to support several national gang prevention efforts, whereby they have played a major role of providing technical assistance to such efforts as 2Cooltura.com, which is aimed at helping youth get out of gangs as well as educate parents about the consequences of gang life and how they can help their kids stay out of gangs. The website includes several public service announcements developed by Luis Cardona, providing youth and parents with solution-based approaches to the gang issue and where to go for help.

Further, the Department funds Linkages to Learning Programs, which deliver comprehensive services to youth and their families whose needs have been identified by school staff. We recently held a staff training for our Linkages program provided by Luis Cardona, that has strengthened our providers' capacity to serve gang involved youth and families. The Department actively partners with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and we have partnerships with the Juvenile Justice System to provide assessment and diversion services, as well as some transition services to help young people re-enter the community successfully.

We have attempted to centralize coordination of gang prevention efforts through the work of the County's Gang Prevention Steering Committee and through the extensive work of the County's Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator. The Steering Committee's membership includes directors of the Montgomery County Departments of Corrections and Rehabilitation; Recreation; and Montgomery County Public Schools, as well as representatives of the County Executive's African American, Asian, and Latino Advisory Boards. The Steering Committee provides oversight at a high level of government, and is responsible for oversight of implementation of the nearly 100 recommendations made by the Gang Prevention Task Forces. Work in this area is coordinated through a series of Task Groups (including the Community Action, Community Awareness and Information Management Task Groups), responsible for implementing designated recommendations. The Task Groups have broad representation from community organizations, business, and community advocates.

We are expanding our efforts, through the creation of the Street Outreach Network (SON), which will place community resources directly in targeted areas that will serve gang involved youth, youth at risk of joining gangs, and their parents as well. Street outreach workers may be former gang members who have successfully left gang life behind and serve as community role models for youth. We will also be establishing High School Wellness Centers that will provide youth development, somatic and behavioral health care, educational and familial supports, and other outreach services. This effort is essential as it demonstrates a vital coordinated effort between the Department of Health and Human Services and Montgomery County Public Schools to better serve gang involved youth, as well as those at risk of joining gangs. These centers will also provide an intensive support environment for youth to resolve conflicts that would otherwise escalate without appropriate guidance.

An important element of our gang prevention effort is the centralized coordination offered by the County's Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator, Luis

Cardona. Luis provides critical services through community education, participating in community forums, providing support to individual young people and families as they strive to exit gangs, serving as a mentor when needed, maintaining liaison with relevant departments and agencies of government. Luis works closely with his counterpart in Prince George's and recently convened a regional meeting of gang prevention coordinators, including gang coordinators from Northern Virginia to facilitate regional prevention/intervention efforts. Luis regularly participates in meetings with community stakeholders and other partners to resolve issues. Luis has a sense of what activity is occurring in the community, and has sufficient standing and credibility both in government and on the street to positively impact operations in both arenas.

The cornerstone of Montgomery County's partnership with Prince George's County is the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center. This partnership fully implements a recommendation of the joint County Task force, to offer a presence in the Takoma Park/Langley Park community to combat youth violence. The youth participants have clearly identified the CYOC as a neutral territory free from the influence of gangs. The Center offers a one stop shop in the community for direct service and/or referral for behavioral and somatic health care, employment training and job-referral, educational and income supports, mentoring and other supportive programs. Since its opening in May, the Center has served more than 100 young people and their families. The CYOC has recently expanded services to families through the inclusion of a parent support social worker. We have done this through a partnership with the state funded Collaborative Supervision and Focused Enforcement program (CSAFE), a multi agency law enforcement effort program that covers costs for the social worker. In the few months of operation it has become quite clear that the parents of the youth served at the CYOC need as much if not more services than the youth. Several youth participants from our positive youth development program have participated in focus groups to help tailor a national gang prevention message that will reach youth and families from around the nation.

Additionally, the County awarded seven community mobilization grant awards on behalf of the Joint County partnership, to fund recreational, arts, leadership and employment programs; and we anticipate funding up to ten additional programs during the coming year. Two members of our Youth Leadership Council (YLC), former gang rivals, are part of the mini grant review committee that determines which projects are funded.

We have had notable successes as a result of our work: individuals are undergoing tattoo removal to facilitate their gainful employment; individuals have been diverted from gang involvement. Many more have received the services and supports that will enable them to move on to safer and more successful endeavors. We are continuing to strengthen our efforts to relocate gang involved youth to safe havens.

We have been very fortunate to have your support to continue funding for the County's centralized gang unit, as well as the Youth Opportunity Center. Your leadership and foresight on this issue makes it possible for local jurisdictions to design

solutions that will work long into the future. In addition, it gives communities the confidence that these supports will be present for the long-term and are not just a passing fad. We thank you for your support and implore you to continue funding our regional partnership, and the County's efforts. We believe this model is sound and may be replicated across the nation.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you may have.